



BIR 2017 Convention: Shifting spotlight for e-scrap

With China clamping down on unprocessed scrap imports, how e-scrap is handled in Hong Kong and India is likely to change.

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Presenters at the E-Scrap Committee meeting at the 2017 Bureau of International Recycling (BIR) World Recycling Convention, held in late May in Hong Kong, focused on looming changes to their sector in light of China's National Sword import restrictions campaign.

Steve Wong, who serves as president of the China Scrap Plastics Association and as managing director of Hong Kong-based Fukutomi Co. Ltd., said the National Sword campaign enacted in China in early 2017 has resulted in the inspection of "every container" registered as holding plastic scrap.

This has included containers full of shredded e-scrap plastic, which Wong said are being inspected closely for adherence to a legally mandated 5% contamination limit.

Wong indicated that all containers believed to be carrying shredded WEEE (waste electrical and electronic equipment) plastic are "supposed to be prohibited." He also said, however, that plastic scrap that is reprocessed into a product of uniform resin or colour may still be able to enter the country.

By and large, said Wong, National Sword has resulted in ports clogged with containers full of plastic scrap. Between demurrage charges and increased Customs clearance fees, many plastic scrap import transactions have become unaffordable.

Wong also said that within China, plastic recycling operations are being inspected and shut down, even many located in government-subsidized EcoParks and Resource Parks. Wong predicted that more WEEE plastic will be “recycled at source more often, with electrostatic separation” and other techniques. “I think that will be the trend in the future.”

Two Hong Kong-based presenters said the city of more than 7 million people often has shipped its unprocessed or semi-processed WEEE materials to China, but now is facing changes.

Goh Kian Guan of Chiho-Tiande Group Ltd. said Hong Kong generates some 70,000 tons of WEEE materials annually. He said 80% of this material is collected, but then 93% of that is exported.

The clamped border to China created by National Sword is the latest factor that has prompted Chiho-Tiande to invest in a 60,000 tonnes-per-year WEEE processing plant in the Yuen Long section of Hong Kong. Goh described the facility as containing both manual dismantling capacity and automated shredding and sorting equipment. (Much of the automated processing equipment is being supplied by Denmark-based Eldan Recycling.)

Both Goh and Shirley Kwok of the Hong Kong Recycling Chamber of Commerce expressed disappointment in the Hong Kong Government’s joint venture with ALBA Integrated Waste Solutions (IWS) to operate a collection program and build an electronic scrap processing facility. (ALBA IWS’ Nigel Mattravers served as a guest speaker at the following BIR Plastics Committee meeting.)

Kwok, who also works with Hong Kong-based firm Wing Fat Recycling, said the introduction of expensive licenses by the Hong Kong government has presented “a big challenge” that it is proving “too difficult” for the small collectors who serve as the first link in the e-scrap recycling chain in Hong Kong.

Goh said Chiho-Tiande “cannot compete” against what he called a subsidized plant being built by ALBA IWS, which he said was “essentially a monopoly” for a 10-year period. “After that there will be no [other] players in the market,” he commented. “Is the government taking the right approach?”

E-Scrap Committee member Surendra Borad of Belgium-based Gemini Corp. NV provided an overview of WEEE recycling conditions in India.

As Asia’s other nation with more than 1 billion people (along with China), India has now become one of the five largest producers of e-scrap globally, with an estimated 1.85 million tonnes generated annually.

Summarizing findings from a recently-completed report prepared by KPMG and The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, Borad said the already-high figure is expected to reach 5.2 million tonnes per year by 2020, “growing at a compound annual growth rate of about 30%.” He added, “It’s quite a number, and the growth is very significant.”

The challenge is considerable for India, said Borad, commenting, "A mere 1.5% of India's total e-waste gets [properly] recycled due to poor infrastructure, legislation and framework, which leads to a waste of diminishing natural resources and irreparable damage to the environment and the health of the people working in the industry."

As much as 95% of e-scrap collected in India "is managed by the unorganized sector, which dismantles the disposed of products instead of recycling them," he added.

On the opportunity side, said Borad, "There is a high demand and a huge market that is available for the recycling of electronic scrap in India."

The BIR 2017 World Recycling Convention was held at the Hong Kong Convention Centre 22-24 May.